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# FIGHTING WORDS

## FOUR NEW DOCUMENT FINDS REIGNITE OLD DEBATES IN TAIJIQUAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

# DOUGLAS WILE

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## ABSTRACT

Martial arts historiography has been at the center of China's culture wars and a *cause célèbre* between traditionalists and modernizers for the better part of a century. Nowhere are the stakes higher than with the iconic art of *taijiquan*, where, based on a handful of documents in the Chen, Wu, and Yang lineages, traditionalists have mythologized the origins of taijiquan, claiming the Daoist immortal Zhang Sanfeng as progenitor, while modernizers won official government approval by tracing the origins to historical figures in the Chen family. Four new document finds, consisting of manuals, genealogies, and stele rubbings, have recently emerged that disrupt the narratives of both camps, and, if authentic, would be the urtexts of the taijiquan 'classics', and force radical revision of our understanding of the art. This article introduces the new documents, the circumstances of their discovery, their contents, and the controversies surrounding their authenticity and significance, as well as implications for understanding broader trends in Chinese culture and politics.

On August 21, 2007, the General Administration of Sport of China awarded Chen Village, Henan, a commemorative plaque acknowledging its status as 'the birthplace of taijiquan', and Yuan Fuquan of the Wen County Sports Academy proclaimed, 'Dust finally settles on century-old controversy' [Yuan 2011]. However, what was 'dust' to Yuan proved to be fuel to the opposition, and just two months later, a firestorm of protest forced the removal of the plaque. The awarding of the plaque seemed to be the culmination of half a century of official recognition for the Chen Wangting (1597-1664) taijiquan creation thesis and was tantamount to granting a patent or certificate of authenticity. Why, then, was the case officially closed and then reopened? Perhaps not coincidentally, just as Chen Village was celebrating its victory, long hidden evidence was emerging in neighboring villages that would disrupt official orthodoxy and could not be dismissed as mere mythology. Actually, these old genealogies, manuals, gazetteers, and stele inscriptions give ammunition to both sides in a protracted culture war between traditionalists and modernizers. Over time, the controversy has become bigger than taijiquan, bigger than martial arts, bigger even than traditionalists versus modernizers, and has emerged today as a site of resistance to Party control of culture and academic freedom. The use of colorful expletives, such as 'liar', 'criminal', 'con artist', 'counterfeiter', 'party hack', and 'sycophant', hardly characteristic of 'a nation of decorum' (*liyi zhi bang*), testifies to the intensity of emotions on all sides of this battle over ownership of China's 'intangible cultural heritage'.

This article introduces the provenance, contents, authenticity, and significance of four new document finds in China. Geographically, three of them cluster in the sliver of Henan Province just north of the Yellow River, traditionally regarded as the cradle of Chinese civilization and a hotbed of martial arts activity. Specifically, these new finds include the 'Li Family Genealogy', 'Martial Arts Manual' and 'Li Daozi Stele' of the Li family and Thousand Year Temple (*Qianzaizi*) of Tang Village in Boai County; the 'Wang Family Spear Manual' of the Wang family of Wangbao Village in Boai; 'The Secret Art of Taijiquan' of the Wang family of Zhaobao Town in Wen County; and the 'Wang Family Genealogy' of Xinjiang County, Shanxi Province. These are the most

significant new document releases since the 1970s Yang family material published by Li Yingang, Chang Hongkui, Wu Mengxia, and Shen Jiazhen and the manuscripts of Wu Chengqing and Wu Ruqing [Wile 1983,1996]. Together, these latest finds, if authentic, are the Dead Sea Scrolls of taijiquan studies, containing the oldest versions of what have come to be regarded as the core 'classics', but potentially more far-reaching in significance, as they challenge prevailing origin narratives.

There are a number of reasons that document finds are so important in taijiquan historiography. First, perhaps more than any other Asian martial art, the slim body of theoretical works defining the art, since Guan Baiyi's 1912 *Taijiquan jing* (*Taijiquan classics*), have acquired the status of 'classics' (*jing*) and are accepted as normative in all styles. Second, they not only describe movement principles and self-defense techniques, but are widely regarded as expressing the very ethos of Chinese culture. Taijiquan practitioners may fairly be called 'a people of the book'.

Nowhere is the saying 'history is told by the conquerors' truer than in China, where official dynastic histories legitimized the founding myth of the imperial family and articulated a normative political ideology for intellectual discourse. At various times, Legalism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism have all enjoyed state patronage. In the twentieth century, Chinese Marxist historians overthrew the traditional focus on emperors, generals, and Confucian statesmen and celebrated peasant ingenuity and resistance to ruling class exploitation. In today's martial arts marketplace, the various schools and styles vie to become commercial conquerors by inventing their histories. 'Inventing tradition' in contemporary Chinese martial arts culture takes the form of seeking new documents, revealing new lineages, new 'birthplaces', and ultimately connecting these to old 'Daoist transmissions'. In a mutually beneficial alliance between conservative scholars and local lineages, the former gains ammunition to challenge the Party, and the latter gains intellectual capital to invest in *kaifa* (development). Our twin task, then, is to evaluate the substance of the various revisionist claims and to understand the debate itself as exposing deep ideological fissures in Chinese martial arts historiography and in the wider culture.

#### NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND IN-TEXT CITATIONS

All translations from Chinese to English are the author's own, unless otherwise credited, and he takes full responsibility. Citations from electronic sources are without page numbers, as the websites lack pagination. Moreover, Chinese language material often appears on multiple websites, which often change, but every effort has been made to cite the most stable platforms.

## EMBEDDEDNESS PRECEDES EMBODIMENT

What is the relationship between the practice of taijiquan today and interpretations of its ancient origins? From Marcel Mauss's *technique du corps* to current interest in ritual, performance, and embodiment, we know that physical activities always carry culturally constructed meanings. They are never simply instrumental or practical. Sometimes, the meanings are unconscious, as with washing the dishes; other times, the meanings are explicit, as with the Eucharist or tea ceremony. Culturally constructed meanings are highly mutable, often contested, and subject to historical contingency. Thus, historical and cultural embeddedness always precedes individual embodiment.

The hermeneutics of taijiquan have focused on the proper purpose of the art, and especially on its origins. This is why the stakes are so high in taijiquan historiography. Do Czech basketball players care about the 1891 Massachusetts YMCA origins of their sport? Do Brazilian footballers care about the 1868 English origins of modern soccer. Do Pakistani cricketers care about evidence of cricket in 1550 Guilford, England? Nations have their *de jure* and *de facto* national sports. Field hockey may be the *de facto* national sport of India, but yoga has had far more international impact; capoeira may be the official national sport of Brazil, but soccer excites far more popular passion; and table tennis may be the national sport of China, but martial arts are more iconic. Martial arts are as contested a discursive space for national identity in China as sports are for race relations in the United States. In postmodern China, cultural compartmentalization defies incommensurability and allows sportification and spiritualization to coexist, and thus, even as spectator competitions proliferate, the wrapping of martial arts in religious robes also intensifies. We can only scratch the surface here of the historical and sociological dimensions of what conditions the experience of the individual practitioner, leaving the psychology to the better qualified.

Most of our new documents emerge from a period known by Western historians as the Ming-Qing transition (1570-1670), the decline and fall of the Ming dynasty and rise and consolidation of the Qing. The Manchu conquerors' expansionist policies enlarged the empire, but their two and a half century rule was wracked by a series of rebellions (the Three Feudatories, White Lotus, Taiping, Nian, Muslim, Boxer, and, eventually, Republican) and repeated foreign invasions (two Opium Wars, Eight-Nation Alliance, and two Sino-Japanese Wars). Although the Qing forbade the practice of martial arts and private possession of weapons, this was also the period when history records a flowering of specific styles of martial arts. Many of these rebellions were centered in the northeastern provinces, and it was not unusual for temples and monasteries to serve as refugee camps and safe houses for rebels and bandits. The development of martial arts during this period

must be seen, then, in the context of defending hearth and home against bandits, resisting foreign aggression, and overthrowing a foreign dynasty.

Having failed to resist an enemy they knew, and one willing to rule them in the Chinese style, China was suddenly faced in the nineteenth century with an enemy they did not know and a new political paradigm. Declining dynasties risk the wrath of their gods, manifested in omens, natural disasters, and the loss of the 'Mandate of Heaven'. The Manchu dynasty's double dilemma was how to rally resistance to foreign aggression when they themselves were foreign and whether to be first class citizens in a second-class civilization or second-class citizens in a first-class civilization. As Emerson quipped, 'all she can say at the convocation of nations must be – "I made the tea"' [Emerson 1990 [1824]: 127]. Manchu rule produced a kind of cultural hybridity, and contact with the West would produce another, but unlike the Mongol and Manchu conquests, Western aggression did not aim to found a new dynasty. The closest thing to colonialism that China knew was the tributary system, but China had always been the sun in the solar system of tributaries. They did not want to become a gigantic colony of a Western power as India did, or a 'liberated' protectorate of the upstart Japanese empire.

After acknowledging the failure of pulling up the drawbridge, the first active response to Western imperialism was the Self-Strengthening Movement of the mid-nineteenth century, under the slogan 'Chinese cultural essence and Western technology'. With the West on the march and the dynasty tottering, the Reform Movement and coup d'état of 1898 sought to challenge Manchu rule and recast Confucianism and Buddhism as dynamic and reformist religions capable of standing up to evangelical Christianity. The anti-foreign Boxer Uprising of 1900 was one of the last manifestations of magical cult reaction to Western military and missionary incursions, bearing many of the same features as the Native American Ghost Dance Movement. After the overthrow of the dynasty and founding of the Republic in 1911, a period plagued by warlordism and Western 'spheres of influence', the 1919 May Fourth Movement aimed to smash everything Confucian and abolish the 'unequal treaties' signed with Japan and the West. All of the traditional arts were called to contribute to the task of national revival, but traditionalists and modernizers had different visions. How could traditional medicine survive the challenge of Western biomedicine; how could monarchy survive the challenge of democracy; how could agrarianism survive the challenge of industrialism; how could logographic calligraphy survive the challenge of alphabetic script; how could the literary language survive the challenge of vernacular literature; and how could traditional martial arts survive the challenge of Western firearms and calisthenics? Inspired by the Japanese model



of wedding the samurai spirit with modern technology, Republican era patriots established the National Martial Arts Institute and the Jingwu Academy, both dedicated to overcoming the Chinese 'sick man of Asia' stereotype. During the early Communist period, the government appropriated the martial arts, creating standardized forms, promoting them for health and competition, and endorsing official histories. In the post-Mao era of 'reform and openness', martial arts have become a marketable commodity, attracting martial arts tourism and serving as a public relations weapon in the 'soft power' campaign to win friends around the world.

The nativist impulses of the National Martial Arts Movement (guoshu) did not go unopposed. In Chinese sources, the physical culture debate was expressed as *xinjiu tiyu* (new and old physical culture) or *tuyang tiyu* (native and foreign physical culture). Critics of Western calisthenics, like Wu Tunan and Chen Lifu, emphasized their incompatibility with 'national conditions'. Western sports (ball games, swimming, track and field) were limited to school campuses and upper class social clubs. In Wu Tunan's somewhat hyperbolic view, the promotion of taijiquan, 'will allow the Chinese people to compete on an equal footing with the Western powers and cause the imperialists to withdraw in defeat; all unequal treaties will naturally disappear without repeal. Isn't this tantamount to achieving freedom and equality?' [Wu 1983: 6]. The current globalization of Chinese martial arts and the Olympic success of Chinese athletes make it difficult to imagine a time when this was framed as an either/or debate. Thus, beginning with Huang Zongxi's seventeenth-century account of the Internal School, through twentieth-century 'self-strengthening', to the current promotion of taijiquan as 'Daoist self-cultivation', its practice has often been played out in the context of national identity and even foreign relations. In this way, an invisible thread of cultural continuity connects the Internal School's 'softness overcoming hardness' with today's 'soft power'.

## A HUNDRED FLOWERS IN MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES TRADITIONALISTS AND MODERNIZERS

The 1990s witnessed a kind of undeclared 'hundred flowers' era in China's martial arts studies. Dissenters from party-line orthodoxy, formerly silenced or driven to the margins in Taiwan or Hong Kong, now reasserted themselves, and a number of different intellectual power centers and competing local martial arts tourist destinations blossomed. The opening salvo was the National Physical Education Committee's 1992 awarding of a third-class prize for 'scientific and technical progress' to Jiang Bailong's *Wudangquan zhi yanjiu* (*Research on Wudang martial arts*), a collection of essays championing the Zhang Sanfeng-Wudang creation thesis. It was essentially an attempt to fight fire with fire, to use modern scholarly methodology to historicize a myth. In 1994, the Wudang Temple complex was named a UNESCO world heritage site, Daoist monks were ordained, and facilities were established to train international taijiquan students. The historicists struck back, and in 1997, the National Physical Education Committee's *Zhongguo wushu shi* (*History of Chinese martial arts*) reasserted the Chen Village genesis theory. However, soon after in 2000, Meng Yiding published an article in *People's Daily* arguing that Tang Daoists Xu Xuanping and Li Daozi practiced taijigong, a precursor of taijiquan. He maintained that recent discoveries in Wen County prove that Wang Zongyue was a native of Shanxi, that Jiang Fa of Zhaobao studied with Wang for seven years, and flatly denied that what the Chen family practiced was taijiquan. Clearly, the Party not only tolerated dissent, but even official organs no longer spoke with one voice.

Meanwhile, in 2002, a document find in nearby Tang Village, Henan, was about to blow the origins controversy wide open. The discovery was presented at a 2004 conference on refugee culture in Hongdong County, Shanxi Province and electrified the participants. It was made public in 2005, and dissident scholars swarmed the surrounding villages, seeking fresh evidence of pre-Chen taijiquan roots in hidden genealogies, manuals, and local gazetteers that survived the anti-feudal book burnings of the Cultural Revolution. Paralleling these document finds are individuals coming forward and claiming to be living successors to long lost lineages, such as Ansheng Yuandao of the White Cloud Temple, who in 1990 demonstrated 'Original Taiji', maintaining that it was the ancient Wudang Daoist form and crediting the Yellow Emperor as its creator [Zhang 2014]. These developments are reminiscent of recent archeological finds in the Yangzi River basin challenging the Yellow River cradle of Chinese civilization orthodoxy.

For General Qi Jiguang in the Ming, the basic binary in martial arts was 'flowery' versus 'practical'; for Huang Zongxi in the Ming-Qing Transition, it was 'internal' versus 'external'; in the Republican Period,

it was Shaolin versus Wudang; and today, it is 'traditional' versus 'modern'. Who are the traditionalists, and who are the modernizers? The traditionalists could also be called conservatives, idealists, fundamentalists, cultural nationalists, preservationists, creationists, or even self-orientalizers. They are animated by a fundamental belief in the identity of mythos and ethos and an acceptance of the compatibility of technology and mythology. Militant Christian evangelism was obviously a key factor in the dynamism of Western imperialism; likewise, Shinto provided Japan with the spiritual adrenalin for empire building. In both cases, they were able to preserve traditional elements, seemingly at odds with modernity, and undertake great missions with religious fervor: civilizing the backward, saving heathen souls, or driving Western imperialism from Asia. Marxism offered science and nationalism, and a kind of dialectical teleology, but banished the supernatural. The May Fourth Movement's attack on Confucianism and the Cultural Revolution's attack on every last vestige of traditional religion created a cultural identity crisis. Traditionalists, who witnessed the replacement of Confucianism with communism and empire with nation state, were convinced that China could have its mythos and modernity, too. In the martial arts, this manifested as an obsession with establishing the Daoist origins of taijiquan.

What is accomplished by labeling the art 'Daoist'? First, it raises the practice from mere self-defense to high culture art; second, it makes it uniquely a product of Chinese culture. The Daoist origins thesis focuses on a singular act of creation by an enlightened individual; the evolutionary thesis is a collective project, historically and culturally contingent. Once taijiquan has been sacralized as a Daoist creation, it is just a short step to frame it as a religion. In the religious reading of taijiquan, the 'classics' become scripture, masters become apostles, and the practice becomes a prayer [Wile 2007]. Identifying a creator is about creating an identity. China has alternately seen itself as a Confucian civilization, a model for Third World revolution, a communist utopia, a free market factory for the world, and an emerging superpower. The resulting future shock has left a hunger to uncover a distinctively 'Chinese' core, and some who have turned to taijiquan have turned it into a Daoist practice.

Although Nathan Sivin has so problematized the term 'Daoist' that one uses it today with the greatest trepidation, he raises some questions about conventional assumptions that are relevant to our present discussion of taijiquan historiography: 'The notion that everything began as a grant to the commons from a legendary founder is so entrenched in traditional culture that this form of it lingers on despite the historical evidence accumulated against it' [Sivin 1995: 16]. Anna Seidel adds: Zhang Sanfeng 'biographies and legends lack even the faintest allusion to his being a boxing master' [Seidel 1970: 484].

Kristofer Schipper agrees with Sivin, and what he says about Laozi is equally applicable to Zhang Sanfeng:

**Although what has been transmitted through the ages about Laozi is of a purely legendary nature, these legends are not without historical interest. In fact, they are often more significant than 'historical facts', because they show how Taoism and Laozi were already thought of in ancient times. [Schipper 2000: 33]**

Various accounts of Zhang place him in the Song, Yuan, or Ming dynasties; there are three ways of writing the name and claims of three different figures; and there are 81 different traditions attributed to his creation. Of the 'three old manuscripts' copied by Li Yiyu from his uncle Wu Yuxiang, the preface to the 1867 copy in the possession of Ma Yinshu says: 'Taijiquan began with Zhang Sanfeng of the Song dynasty'. However, Hao He's 1881 copy is more cautious, saying, 'I do not know the origin of taijiquan, but its subtleties and marvels are exhaustively described by Wang Zongyue' [Tang 1963:153]. This inconsistency has contributed to the general lack of consensus. Nevertheless, for traditionalists, attacking the Zhang Sanfeng creation theory is tantamount to committing cultural treason.

Among the taijiquan lineages that emerged during the early twentieth century, the Yang family style enjoyed the greatest popularity. This is due to three factors: four generations of outstanding exponents, literati participation and promotion, and nationwide geographic reach. Well-placed students of Yang Chengfu, like Chen Weiming, Zheng Manqing, and Dong Yingjie, were able to publish books introducing his teachings in a style that accomplished the twin goals of 'popularization and elevation', consciously positioning the art to reach the greatest numbers and giving it high culture credentials. The latter meant supplying mythological origins, philosophical foundations, and self-cultivation cachet. Most of these works included fabricated biographies of Zhang Sanfeng, parallels with Daoist classics, and principles from inner alchemy. The following passage from Yang Chengfu's 1931 *Taijiquan shiyongfa* (*Self-defense applications of taijiquan*) illustrates the hagiographic tone of much of the first generation of modern taijiquan literature:

**One day the immortal Zhang Sanfeng saw a burst of golden light where the clouds meet the mist shrouded peaks. A thousand rays of marvelous qi spun and danced in the Great Void. The Immortal hurried to the spot but found nothing. He searched where the golden light had touched down and found a mountain stream and cave. Approaching the mouth of the cave, two golden snakes with flashing eyes emerged. The**

Immortal swished his duster, and the golden light descended. He gazed upon it and realized that it was two long spears about seven feet five inches. They seemed to be made of rattan but were not rattan; seemed of wood but were not of wood. Their quality was such that swords could not damage them, and they could be soft or hard at will. A rare glow emanated from within, and looking deeper, he found a book. Its title was *Taiji Sticking and Adhering Spear*, and it was destined to be revealed to the world.

[Wile 1983: 138]

If this passage reads like fantasy fiction, there were also forays into sociological theorizing. The somatization of China's social ills seems to be epitomized in the following excerpt from Yang Chengfu's 1934 *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* (*The complete theory and applications of taijiquan*):

The gentlemen of today know only of the poverty of the nation but not of its weakness ... We are poor because we are weak; truly weakness is the cause of poverty. If we examine the rise of nations, we find that they all begin by strengthening the people. The virility and vigor of the Europeans and Americans goes without saying, but the dwarf-like Japanese, while short in stature, are disciplined and determined. When the gaunt and emaciated members of our race face them, one need not resort to divination to predict the outcome.

[Wile 1983: 153].

There are many levels of complexity in this short passage. First, Yang Chengfu was illiterate, and the book is widely believed to have been ghost written by Zheng Manqing. Second, the words are excerpted from a purported dialogue between Yang Chengfu and his grandfather Yang Luchan, who inconveniently died eleven years before Chengfu's birth. Third, one could cogently argue that it was imperialism, landlordism, corruption, and class contradictions that were the causes of poverty, and that 'weakness' was the result rather than the cause. However, Zheng was very suspicious of the motives of those who analyzed China's ills in terms of class because they seemed also to be enemies of traditional culture in general. He says in the forward to his 1947 *Zhengzi taijiquan zixiu xinfa* (*Master Zheng's new method for self-study in taijiquan*): 'Some people have indulged in wild slander, claiming that taijiquan was not created by the immortal Zhang Sanfeng. I do not know what their motives are' [Wile 1985: 11]. The 'some people' referred to here, of course, are Tang Hao, Xu Zhen, and the other historicizers, who believed that China's weakness was precisely the result of superstition and magical thinking, and that clinging to old myths should not be the test of patriotism. They felt this was part of satirist Lu Xun's 'Ah Q syndrome', delusional compensation for a national inferiority complex,

manifesting in a tendency to declare 'spiritual victory' in the face of humiliating military defeats at the hands of Japan and the West.

Who were the modernizers? The Self-Strengtheners of the mid-nineteenth century believed that Chinese institutions and traditional culture could be left substantially intact, while adopting Western science and technology for practical purposes, especially military. The reformers of the late nineteenth century believed traditional culture should be sifted and winnowed for what was positive and universal, a kind of religious reformation, combined with anti-Manchu, anti-imperialist, and anti-feudal nationalism. The Communists held that national survival depended on rapid and radical transformation, requiring the total transvaluation of all beliefs, institutions, economics, and even the family. Mao believed China did not have the luxury of gradually developing capitalism and a conscious proletariat but must proceed directly to socialism, with an agrarian peasantry as its base. During this period, martial arts historiography, as all scholarly discourse, was heavily laced with Marxist rhetoric. However, today's modernizers have largely abandoned this vocabulary and conduct their research using the kind of evidence-based standards familiar to Western scholars. This is not to say that they have achieved some perfect 'objectivity', or do not have their own set of motives, but just that China has seemingly entered a new era in scholarly style.

In the arena of martial arts scholarship, Tang Hao (1887-1959) emerged as the leader of the modernizers, and his 1931 *Study of Shaolin and Wudang* (*Shaolin Wudang kao*) sent reverberations through the conservative martial arts world, reverberations that are still felt today. For some, he is the founder of modern martial arts scholarship; for others, he is the anti-Christ of traditional Chinese culture. He was for modern martial arts scholarship what Lu Xun was for modern Chinese literature, a left-wing intellectual who carried the May Fourth Movement torch for reform. His attempts to apply modern research methods to martial arts history won him admirers but also made him a lightning rod for conservative attacks. The first generation of martial arts literature, while patriotic in tone, indulged in what Tang called 'inventing mythic origins and romanticizing the biographies of historical masters' [Deng 1980: 69]. In 1928, Tang was arrested for 'inciting peasant violence' in Jiangsu, and after his release the following year, fled to Japan, where he studied Japanese language, law, and bayonet. It was during this time, according to conservative scholars, that he fell under the spell of Japanese anti-Chinese propaganda and became the archenemy of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

Returning to China in 1930, he joined the Central Martial Arts Institute in Nanjing, and in his capacity as head of the editorial department, visited Chen Village in Henan, where, based on certain knowledge of

Yang Luchan's study with Chen Changxing (1771-1853) and references in family documents to Chen Wangting (1597-1664) as 'creating martial arts forms' and 'keeping the *Yellow Court Classic* by his side', declared Chen Wangting the creator of taijiquan. Tang presented his findings in *A Study of Shaolin and Wudang*, seeking to disprove Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng's roles in the development of Shaolin gongfu and taijiquan: 'Chinese martial arts were already highly developed in ancient times, and there is no reason to fabricate myths about Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng' [Tang 1931: 7]. Since the Central Institute's official classification of the martial arts into Shaolin and Wudang, pitched battles between the two ensued, and Tang Hao's studies managed to anger both camps. In 1931, he resigned from the Central Institute amidst increasing controversy, admitting, 'I realize I may have offended some people' [Tang 1931: 8], and returned to Shanghai, where he practiced law and wrote for the *Guoshu tongyi yuekanshe* (*National martial arts unification journal*). For Tang, scientific scholarship was a prerequisite for modernization and self-strengthening; for conservatives, this struck at the heart of China's cultural self-confidence, precisely as Japan was invading Manchuria. He was arrested by the Japanese occupiers in 1941, and after his release moved to Anhui, and then, in 1945, following Liberation, to Shanghai, where he joined the Commission of Sports and continued his groundbreaking work in martial arts studies until his death in 1959 [Judkins 2014].

Attacks on Tang Hao typically take three forms: he is a culture traitor; his theories are contrary to popular belief; and he had his facts wrong. Li Bin, Society for the Promotion of Traditional Chinese Culture 2014 award winner, brands Tang Hao as an 'outsider', declaring: 'Research in taijiquan history is the business of taijiquan practitioners' [Li 2012]. Even more damning, Li accuses him of collaborating with Japan's Manchuria policies by 'obliterating Yao, Shun, and Yu' (denigrating traditional culture), 'supporting agricultural pioneers' (armed Japanese immigration), and 'legitimizing Manchukuo' (supporting the puppet government of Henry Puyi), adding that his 'light beating and speedy release from prison' was due not to a lack of evidence of his communist affiliations, but because his 'cultural destruction' played into the hands of the Japanese policy of demoralizing the Chinese. Further attempting to cast shade on his character and contribution, Li Bin points out that Tang's wife committed suicide, and his gravestone inscription makes no mention whatever of his pioneering work in martial arts studies. However, Li makes a telling distinction between Xu Zhen and Gu Jiegang, whom he considers legitimate critics of antiquarianism, and Tang Hao, whom he considers a Japanese sympathizer and traitor (Li, 2012). Yu Zhijun delivers the coup de grace, saying that 'the basic error is that Tang and Gu are taken as genuine historians ... instead of being judged historiographic criminals' [Yu 2007]. After 1949, when Tang's version of taijiquan's origins became party line, attacks were silenced

but have resurfaced today as code for protest against official orthodoxy. If Tang Hao, Xu Zhen, Shen Shou, and Gu Liuxin represent the first generation of martial arts history modernizers, Kang Gewu, Yuan Fuquan, and Zhou Weiliang represent the second generation, with Cheng Feng, Li Libing, Wei Meizhi, Yan Ziyuan, Qi Jianhai, Li Bin, Li Shirong, and Yu Zhijun leading the neo-traditionalists.

Once taijiquan came to be seen as not merely a physical technique but the vessel for everything fine in Chinese culture – its philosophy, medicine, and aesthetics – Tang Hao's bombshell research highlighted the contradictions between left and right, traditionalists and modernizers, mythologizers and historicizers, materialists and idealists, preservationists and iconoclasts, purists and hybridizers, creationists and evolutionists. In the traditionalist camp, there were those who wanted to reject everything foreign, and in the modernizing camp, there were those who advocated wholesale Westernization. Both camps had their compromisers, and both agreed that martial arts could play a role in reviving the nation. Formerly, lineage was the mechanism for the transfer of cultural capital and the basis for legitimacy, but after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, and the adoption of 'the theory of Marx and the thought of Mao Zedong', official epistemology upheld the materialist view that knowledge is produced in the struggle for survival, i.e., doing; and demonized the idealist view that knowledge is produced by deduction, i.e., thinking. Materialists are the champions of the masses; idealists represent the ruling class and are the enemy. This paradigm dominated all historiography in China for nearly half a century, including martial arts history, but today one may read whole articles without ever encountering the names Marx or Mao. The new documents complicate the old myth versus history binary, both of which had to overcome three gaps in the record: 1) how to bridge the gap from the Internal School of the Wudang mountains in Hubei to taijiquan in Chen Village in Henan, 2) how to trace the transition from hard Chen style to soft Yang style, and 3) how to account for the paucity of written theory in the Chen family and its richness in Wu and Yang. The new evidence, if authentic, can indeed help to connect the dots, and in ways that give comfort to both traditionalists and modernizers.



## HISTORY OR HOAX A TALE OF FOUR VILLAGES

Looking at the provenance of the four documents and the circumstance surrounding their discovery, there seems to have been a nexus of interrelations between Chen Village, Tang Village, Wangbao Village, and Zhaobao Town, involving intermarriage, shared interest in martial arts, and study at the Thousand Year Temple, as well as some participation in subversive activities. This is a very different backdrop for an origin narrative than an immortal's dream, observation of a snake and stork, or the discovery of a secret manual in a cave, complete with fog machines and psychedelic light shows. It ties together the Chen, Li, and Wang families of Henan with the Wang family of Shanxi, and even Chang Naizhou and the Wu family.

### 1 THE LI FAMILY OF TANG VILLAGE

Our story begins with a tiny clan village called Tangcun in Boai County, Henan, a village of some 1300 souls, the vast majority of whom share the surname Li. The Li family has revealed three documents: a genealogy, a martial arts manual, and a stele rubbing. The age-old custom of compiling family genealogies was suspended in 1949 and specifically targeted in the 1962 'Four Purifications Movement' (*siqing yundong*) as 'a feudal remnant'. However, in 2002, in the more 'open' post-Mao era, Li family clansman Li Libing was tasked with bringing the genealogy up to date, the third revision since the family's move to Tang Village from Shanxi in 1371. His methodology included collecting written records, conducting interviews, inspecting gravestone inscriptions, and convening meetings of clansmen. The last version, written in 1716 by tenth generation Li Yuanshan, was discovered in the possession of villager Li Chenghai, who had moved to Xi'an and was initially reluctant to expose the genealogy because of frank references to ninth generation rebel leader Li Yan and Li family persecution during the Cultural Revolution. The 'Genealogy', a handwritten manuscript of twenty-five pages, extends from first generation Li Qingjiang to 12th generation Li Helin. Compiler Li Yuanshan was a martial arts teacher, who in his retirement returned to Tang Village and established a martial arts academy. Based on the 'Genealogy's' biographies of notable clansmen, the family had a tradition of excelling in both cultural and martial pursuits, with some 60 references to 'dual cultivation of the cultural and martial', 29 references to 'martial arts masters', and 4 references to establishing martial arts halls [Li 2010].

Li Helin's grandson, Li Jiazhen, operated a salt shop in Wuyang County, where Wu Yuxiang's older brother Wu Chengqing was magistrate. A branch of the Li family had settled in Liu Village, Boai County, and Li Xinghao was granted a post overseeing salt transport by the Qianlong Emperor. This enabled the Li family to enter the salt business, including production and retail sales at a location called Beiwu Duzhen. Based on fieldwork, Yan Bin believes that Wang Zongyue was not the author of the classic text that bears his name, but copied it from a Li family manuscript while a student of Li Helin. Pursuing this reconstruction of events, Yan believes that Jiazhen subsequently shared a copy with Wu Chengqing, who in turn shared it with his younger brother Wu Yuxiang. Yan concludes that the reason Wu Yuxiang subsequently sought out Chen Qingping of Zhaobao is that Qingping's approach was more compatible with the soft style described in the salt shop classics that Wu copied in Wuyang [Yan 2012].

Of the 'Genealogy's' nine sections, the preface and seventh section are most relevant to martial arts history. The preface tells us that eighth generation Li Chunmao (1568-1666) studied martial arts with Daoist priest Bogong Wudao in the Thousand Year Temple, wrote the 'Wuji yangshenggong shisanshi quan' (*Infinity health cultivation thirteen postures boxing*), and taught martial arts across several provinces. The 'Genealogy' also relates the story of ninth generation Li Xin (Yan), Li Zhong (1598-1689), and cousin Chen Wangting (1597-1664) of Chen Village, all studying in the Taijimen (Taiji Gate) of the Thousand Year Temple, and collaboratively creating *taiji yangshenggong shisanshi* (taiji health cultivation thirteen postures) and *tongbeigong* (back-through art). Later, the two cousins accompanied Chen Wangting, when he competed in the provincial military examinations in Kaifeng. Incensed by an unfair judge's scoring in the archery contest, the three participated in the fatal beating of the man. For this, Li Xin was stripped of his *gongsheng* degree and fled to Qicheng, where he worked in his uncle's granary until it went bankrupt. Returning to his hometown Tang Village, he resumed his martial arts study in the Thousand Year Temple but was 'enticed' to join the rebel army of Li Zicheng, which sought to overthrow the Ming dynasty. He rapidly rose to the rank of general but was assassinated in 1644 on the eve of the collapse of the rebellion and Manchu takeover. The seventh section of the 'Genealogy' contains the titles of three texts related to martial self-cultivation, but only half of the 'Shisanshi gong ge' (Song of the thirteen postures routine) has survived, while the other two are missing [Li 2010].

Pursuing his research further, in 2004, Li Libing was introduced to Li Lichao, who produced another manuscript that had been hidden in a space above a door lintel in his house. This document is a bona fide martial arts manual, consisting of 14 texts in three parts, the earliest of which is dated 1591 and attributed to Li Chunmao (1568-1666). The

titles, texts, and postures are nearly identical to the corpus in the Wu and Yang lineages. If authentic, these manuscripts would be the urtexts of the 'taijiquan classics'. All the hallmarks of taijiquan as we know it today are there: moving from center, distinguishing full and empty, erect posture, opening the qi channels, softness overcoming hardness, stillness overcoming speed, and four ounces deflecting a thousand pounds.

Examining the various texts in the Li family manual, eighth generation Li Chunmao's 1591 'Wuji yangsheng quanlun', (Treatise on infinity health cultivation boxing), although containing no martial applications, shows the mature fusion of inner alchemy with qigong and qigong with movement, together with the Confucian dedication to family health and long life. Chunmao's 1591 'Shisanshi lun' (Treatise on the thirteen postures) downplays inner alchemy, instead emphasizing the movement principles of root in the feet, whole-body integration, and global full and empty potential. Ninth generation Li Zhong's (1598-1689) 'Shisanshi shiming' (Defining the thirteen postures) uses the trigrams and five phases to analyze the eight hand techniques and five kinds of footwork. Li Zhong's 'Shisanshi xingong xinjie' (Elucidation of the practice of the thirteen postures) explains the roles of mind, qi, and spirit, using a series of vivid images to illustrate movement qualities: nine bends pearl, tempered steel, silk reeling, folding, mountains and rivers, bows and arrows, wheels and axels, birds and cats. Twelfth generation Li Helin's 'Dashou ge' (Song of sparing) applies soft style movement principles to self-defense techniques, with such familiar concepts as: following, sticking, neutralizing, emptying, yielding, and four ounces deflecting a thousand pounds. Li Helin is also credited with authoring the 'Taijiquan lun', (Treatise on taijiquan), which elaborates the self-defense principles of interpreting energy, sinking the qi, emptying, sensitivity, and avoidance of double-weightedness.

The third document in the Li family corpus is a rubbing of the 'Shili zhuanbei' (Biographical stele of the monk Shili), formerly housed in the Thousand Year Temple and commemorating the life of a monk named Li Daozi. The Thousand Year Temple thus forms a trio in Chinese martial arts history and legend, along with the Shaolin and Wudang Temples, as cradles of martial arts. In fact, the Li family documents should be read alongside Cheng Zongyou's (1561-?) accounts of gentry participation in the activities of the Shaolin Temple. If Shaolin is Buddhist and Wudang is Daoist, the Thousand Year Temple represents the Unity of the Three Teachings (sanjiao heyi), an ecumenical movement prominent during the Ming and Qing periods, that gathered Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism under one roof without dissolving their distinctive features. The stele inscription, dated 1716 and attributed to Puguang, recounts the life of Li Daozi, born in 614 of the Sui dynasty and active during the Zhenguan period (627-

649) of the Tang. The biography reveals that he was the offspring of a divine dragon and wedelia herb, a precocious youth, and a student of the Daoist classics and qigong. He is credited with writing the 'Wuji yangsheng wugong' (Infinity health-cultivating martial practice), which contains passages on martial ethics in the xia (righteous knight-errant) tradition, as well as such movement principles as softness overcoming hardness and defense over offense. He was granted the surname 'Li' by the emperor, and as an itinerant monk he was known as Shili (Ten Powers), because of his polymath talents. The 'Biographical Stele of the Monk Shili' shares a number of features with biographies of the immortal Zhang Sanfeng: supernatural birth, revelatory dream, extraordinary physical powers, and exceptional longevity [Long 2008: 159-163].

Before turning to the significance of the Li family documents, it cannot be assumed that their authenticity has gone unchallenged. The argument for the authenticity of the documents begins with two early adopters: Cheng Feng, professor of local history at nearby Jiaozuo Normal School, and Wei Meizhi, director of the Boai County Office of Geographic Names. They point out that the genealogy was in the hands of sixteenth generation Li Taicun's wife Wang Guiying, who was illiterate and had neither the means nor the motivation to produce a forgery. Moreover, interviews with villagers confirm details of the genealogy and the tradition of martial arts practice in the region. Information in the genealogy is attested in local gazetteers and gravestone inscriptions, and the location of gravestones corresponds to descriptions in the genealogy. Moreover, the veracity of the genealogy is confirmed by Li Yuanshan's admission of father Li Zhong and uncle Li Yan's rebel backgrounds, embarrassing details he had every reason to conceal. Wang Xuhao, who is not sympathetic with claims of Daoist connections, nevertheless points out that the current holder of the manuscript Wang Guiying had three family members killed by the Li family during the Cultural Revolution and lacked any inclination to credit them with past glories. Cheng and Wei rest their case by pointing out that family genealogies were an integral part of ancestor worship, and any falsifications would be sacrilegious [Cheng et al 2015]. Yan Ziyuan reinforces this by pointing out that the texts observe all the name taboos of emperors and reign years of the Ming and Qing periods, a nicety that would not have been necessary during the Republican or later periods [Yan 2016].

Li Bin believes that the 'Genealogy' resolves all of the former mysteries in the genesis and transmission of taijiquan. It confirms that the Wu family found the 'classics' in a salt shop, and not from Yang Luchan; it attests that Li Yan, Li Zhong, and Chen Wangting are the creators of taijiquan; it demonstrates that the Unity of the Three Teachings is the

true philosophical foundation and not Daoism alone; it suggests that taijiquan has 'one source and two streams': one stream is Chen Village and Zhaobao, and the other stream is Wu, Yang, and Sun; it identifies Li Helin as the true teacher of Wang Zongyue; it proves that Jiang Fa was a refugee from the failed Li Jiyu rebellion, hiding as a servant in Chen Wangting's household; it accepts intermarriage between the Li and Chen families; and it explains why the practice of marital arts survived in the Chen family and was lost in the Li family [Li 2005].

Denying the authenticity is Xicheng Wuseng, an evolutionist, who focuses on anachronisms in the 'Biographical Stele of the Monk Shili' text that undermine its credibility. He argues that the *Yijinjing* (*Sinew changing classic*), referenced in the text, did not exist during the Tang, that branded styles did not emerge until the Ming, and that the word *quan* was not used as a generic term for martial arts during the Tang. These suspicions (and oddly similar language) are shared in articles by Long Weidong, Chen Yaquin, and Lin Zhangqiao. Liu Honggang, Wu Hua, and Dong Lei dismiss the documents as plagiarized, simply passages lifted from the Wu and Yang 'classics'. While some support the authenticity of the documents on the basis of embarrassing disclosures of criminal and subversive activity, others see this as so atypical of genealogy protocol as to be proof of forgery. Zhou Weiliang points out that contemporary Chen family standard-bearers, Chen Zhaopi, Chen Xiaowang, and Chen Zhenlei all relate the story of Wangting killing the examination judge, but omit any reference to Li family involvement, as do local gazetteers. He also points out that the genealogies of other families with martial arts backgrounds, such as the Chen family and that of Chang Naizhou, are not nearly so overpopulated with references to martial arts study and masters, giving the impression of 'protesting too much'. Based on the mysterious disappearance of the stele itself, anachronistic word usage and references (e.g., Shaolinquan and xinyiquan), and suspiciously modern looking calligraphy, Zhou agrees with Zhang Quanhai's assessment that the stele rubbings are 'computer masterpieces'. Zhou Weiliang further points out that passages in Li Chunmao's 'Wuji yangsheng quanlun' are identical with those in *Sun Lutang's Xingyiquan lun* (*Treatise on xingyiquan*), suggesting plagiarism of the Sun text by the Li family. An unlikely denier is Li Shirong, tireless champion of Daoist causes, who, nevertheless, rejects any identification of Li family taiji yangshenggong with taijiquan, any ties between the Li and Chen families, or assertions that Wang Zongyue was a Qing figure. In Li's hands, the two-edged sword cuts exclusively in the direction of denying contamination by Chen involvement and upholding pure Zhang Sanfeng genesis [Li n.d.].

Soft deniers accept that the manuscripts in their current forms are forgeries but say that they 'reflect' an earlier, undiscovered version. Even Yan Ziyuan, one of the most prolific proponents of the Daoist

thesis, concedes that the manuscripts contain some forgeries and interpolations for the sake of commercial exploitation but are genuine in the main. Wang Xuhao is another compromiser, who accepts the authenticity of the Li family manuscripts, interprets them to reveal Li Zhong, Li Yan, and Chen Wangting as the creators of taijiquan and Li Helin as author of the classics and teacher of Wang Zongyue, but dismisses Xu Xuanping, Li Daozi, and Zhang Sanfeng as fabrications of late Qing literati [Wang 2015].

The old official origins orthodoxy was: the lineage is Chen to Yang; the writings are Wu to Yang; the art is Yang to Wu. This has made for a very untidy picture. Thus, if authentic, the Li family manuscripts give us a new origins narrative: the creators of taijiquan (Li Xin, Li Zhong, and Chen Wangting), the authors of the 'classics' (Li Chunmao, Li Zhong, and Li Helin), the link to Chen Village through Chen Wangting, transmission of the Wu family 'classics' through the Li family Wuyang salt shop, and the centrality of the Thousand Year Temple as a matrix of martial arts practice. Wang Xingya and Li Libing flatly declare, 'The Thousand Year Temple is the birthplace of taijiquan ... and the Li family played an extraordinary role in the evolution of the art from wujiquan to taijiquan' [Wang and Li 2005: 166].

Apart from questions surrounding its authenticity, this document discovery has given rise to two highly divergent hermeneutic positions: 1) confirmation of the Daoist genesis theory and 2) proof of the Chen Wangting creation theory. Let us examine each of these positions. Proponents of the Daoist genesis theory are buoyed by the idea that Chen Wangting studied in the Thousand Year Temple. The Li Daozi stele links the temple with martial arts and Daoist qigong practices. Li Chunmao's teacher Bogong Wudao was a Daoist priest, and the similarity between the Li and Yang family texts of the 'Shisanshi xinggong ge' (Song of the practice of the Thirteen Postures) shows that the Yang family preserved this soft style Daoist tradition, eventually lost in the Chen family and suspended in the Li family. This also rehabilitates the Song Shuming, Wu Tunan, and Xiao Tianshi assertions of Daoist origins [Li 2007]. Li Bin speculates that the Li family kept Sanfeng soft style taijiquan secret and taught a hard style to Chen Wangting. In another version, Wangting was taught hard style as a beginner, with soft style reserved for a more advanced stage. A further variation is that the Li family taught Wangting soft style, which was eventually diluted by Chen family paochui, a hard style derived from Hongdong tongbeiquan.

In any case, this removes Chen Wangting from any creative role, or, as Li states, 'Wangting lacked the depth in Daoist teachings to create such a profound art' [Li, 2005]. Lin Junan, who accepts Fu Xi, Huang Di (Yellow Emperor), Laozi, and Zhang Sanfeng as historical figures and

criticizes Tang Hao as ‘making a mess of Chinese martial arts history’ and an example of ‘left-wing extremism’, credits Zhang Sanfeng with infusing taijiquan with Daoist philosophy and inner alchemy, and accepts the Thousand Year Temple as nurturing the art [Lin 2009]. Yan Ziyuan reasons that if Changxing had told Yang Luchan that Wangting was the creator of taijiquan, Yang would have honored him and not Zhang Sanfeng, but, in fact, Wangting learned from Daoist priest Dong Bingqian in the Thousand Year Temple, which is where he heard about Zhang Sanfeng [Yan 2016]. Yuan Fuquan is keen to credit Dong Bingqian of the Thousand Year Temple with teaching the Thirteen Postures, which he considers synonymous with taijiquan, to Chen Wangting. For Yuan, this removes Wang Zongyue from the line of transmission because Wang was 153 years younger than Wangting, and even younger still than Jiang Fa. Yuan concludes that originally the Chen family acknowledged Zhang Sanfeng as progenitor because Yang Luchan would have no other source for this notion. Wu Yuxiang must have heard the same story from Chen Qingping, and thus everyone shared the same tradition [Yuan 2007]. Conservative scholars ask, if Li Yan, Li Zhong and Chen Wangting are given credit for creating taijiquan, then why did they return to the Thousand Year Temple and continue their study with Bogong Wudao? This demonstrates that they are *transmitters* of an art with a long history, not *inventors*.

A soft pro-Daoist position is articulated by Li Bin, when he acknowledges a reflexive tendency to attribute the origins of Chinese arts to legendary culture heroes, but insists that this is a patriotic gesture of respect for the collective creativity of the Chinese ‘laboring masses’ [Li 2007]. Yan Ziyuan, who is sympathetic to Li family claims, also acknowledges that Tang Village has produced a flood of forged stele rubbings and exaggerations, including that the Li family were descendants of a Tang empress, that Li Daozi was a clan member, that Wu Chengqing was a Li family disciple, and that the Li family spawned a host of martial arts styles [Yan 2016]. Summing up the pro-Daoist connection, Cheng Feng calls Li Daozi the ‘progenitor’, the Thousand Year Temple the ‘cradle’, and Wangting the ‘transmitter of taijiquan’ and the ‘creator’ of Chen style [Cheng 2007].

Deniers of the Li family documents and opponents of historical revisionism short-circuit the debate by declaring the new manuscripts forgeries and thus not a serious challenge to the official Chen Wangting creation theory. Liu Honggang, Wu Hua, and Dong Lei join Zhou Weiliang, the author of *History of Chinese Martial Arts*, in concluding that the Li family documents are no more than a patchwork of passages lifted from early Republican Wu, Yang, Chen, and Sun published material. Again, they are led to this conclusion by anachronisms in the text, obvious interpolations, and lack of concrete evidence of ties between Tang Village and Chenjiagou. At issue are Wang

Zongyue’s dates and whether Chen Wangting learned taijiquan in the Thousand Year Temple or from a family transmission. In the eyes of traditionalists, if Wang Zongyue is Ming and Wangting learned in the Thousand Year Temple, then it undermines the official version and opens the door for Zhang Sanfeng. Of course, it doesn’t establish Zhang’s historicity or involvement with martial arts, only that the legend may be older than we thought.

The attempted recentering of the cradle of taijiquan in the Thousand Year Temple reopens the issue of the ‘softening’ of taijiquan. Behind all of this speculation is the implicit assumption that evolution inevitably proceeds in the direction of hard to soft, almost, one might say, from primitive to civilized. There are many theories seeking to explain the ‘softening’ of taijiquan. Was it an act of inspiration, as with the Huang’s stories of Zhang Sanfeng’s dream or observation of nature? Did it happen as a result of Yang Luchan and sons’ modifications for the pampered Manchu princes, or Chengfu’s accommodations for modern intellectuals, or national martial arts academies’ adaptations for mass consumption? This evolutionary theory was strengthened by the appearance of Chen Fake, whose style was considered something of a prehistoric relic and was visibly ‘harder’ than the popular image of taijiquan, prompting some to say that it was not taijiquan at all. Some recent interpretations that have emerged from debates around the four new documents have proposed a ‘same source, different streams’ theory, suggesting that the Thousand Year Temple is the common source, but what Zhaobao took away was the soft style, and what the Chen family received was the hard style.

Finally, it is seldom noted that four of the most important figures in the history of taijiquan all had rebel backgrounds. Huang Zongxi, late Ming philosopher and anti-Manchu resistance fighter, articulated the first soft style theory in his ‘Wang Zhengnan muzhi ming’ (Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan), based on the teachings of knight-errant Wang Zhengnan. Li Yan killed an examination judge and went into hiding, eventually joining the Li Zicheng rebellion against the Ming dynasty and ultimately being assassinated. Chen Wangting and Jiang Fa joined the grain tax resistance movement of Li Jiyu, and Wangting eventually died in their liberated zone in Dengfeng County, Mt. Daiyu, Henan.



## 2 THE WANG FAMILY OF WANGBAO VILLAGE

In 2006, the *Jiaozuo City Radio and Television News* published two articles on the 'The Wangbao Spear Manual' (Wangbao qiangpu). According to Wang Anmin's 1787 'Wangbao qiangpu yuanliu xu' (Preface on the origins of the Wangbao spear manual), the Wang family, like the Li family cited above, moved from Hongdong County in Shanxi to Boai County in Henan, where they established Wangbao Village as part of a resettlement program mandated by the Ming emperor in 1372. During the Jiajing period (1522-1567), fourth generation Wang Zhongjin studied *liuhe shenqiang* (Six unities spirit spear), staff, and hand forms with Daoist Priest Dong Bingqian (1580-1679) of the Taiji Temple (Taijigong) in the Thousand Year Temple, which provided the foundation for the Wangbao Spear Form. (Note: Wei Meizhi and Zhang Dewen dispute the preface's dating and reckon eighth or ninth generation). The hand form that Dong taught was the Shisanshi ruanshou (Thirteen postures soft hands). Wang Zhongjin also studied with Bogong Wudao and Li Chunmao in the Thousand Year Temple, and there were bonds of consanguinity with the Li family of Tang Village.

A century later, Wang Anmin (b. 1731), younger brother Lincang (b. 1758), and Chang Naizhou studied with Li Helin in the Thousand Year Temple. In 1787, Wang Anmin wrote the 'Wangbao Spear Manual', based on Wang Zhongjin's (b. 1610) transmission of the Six Unities Spirit Spear. The form continued to evolve, and Wang Lincang was invited to the capital as tutor to the Manchu princes, which helped spread its fame. It circulated within the family down to nineteenth generation Wang Jinglue (b. 1935). In an addendum to the 'Spear Manual', we find six hand forms, with titles very close to the Li family corpus. Another version of the 'Spear Manual', attributed to Wang Zheyu of the Daoguang period, says that Dong Bingqian taught spear to the Wang family and taijiquan to the Chen family. In Wang Zheyu's version (1846), it says that Dong's transmission was from Zhang Sanfeng, and thus the Chen form originated with Zhang Sanfeng. The Li family of Tangcun had relations with the Chen family and Thousand Year Temple, and the Wang family of Wangbao also had relations with the Thousand Year Temple and Daoist priests Bogong Wudao and Dong Bingqian. Zhongjin studied with Chunmao, and Anmin studied with Li Helin, indicating close ties between the Li and Wang families. At least one Wang family member, Wang Qingyan, was a student of Chen Qingping of Chen Village, which completes the threesome [Anon. 2012].

Pro-Daoist traditionalist Yan Ziyuan points out that both Bogong Wudao and Dong Bingqian of the Thousand Year Temple were older

than Chen Wangting (1597-1664), and the Wang Zheyu version of the 'Spear Manual' states that 'Dong's style originated with Zhang Sanfeng'. Yan says that these facts are what Zhou Weiliang, Kang Gewu, and Yuan Fuquan are not willing to face, and that, when Kang went on a fact-finding expedition to Boai County, he remained silent on this point and denied that Chang Naizhou studied with Li Helin. Yan even threatens to sue them if they do not apologize to the public and retract their claim that Chen Wangting created taijiquan. Yan contends that the Li family kept the soft style within the family and taught the cruder hard style to Chen Wangting, who was young and hotheaded, as evidenced by his killing the military examination judge. Yan further points out that, in the author's preface to *Zengbu Chenshi taijiquan tushuo* (Revised Chen family taijiquan with illustrations and commentary), Chen Xin does not even mention Chen Wangting, and says in his 'Chen Family Genealogy' only that 'he excelled at taijiquan' and alludes to Wangting's hallucinations, depression, and decrepitude, with no explanation of how he mastered the *Huangtingjing* (Yellow court classic) or taijiquan. Moreover, according to Yan, Tang Village rumors about Wang Zongyue gifting a plaque to his teacher Li Helin during the Qing must be untrue because Wang is actually a Ming figure [Yan 2016].

Yan insists that what Dong taught was the Thirteen Postures, that the Thirteen Postures is synonymous with taijiquan, and therefore taijiquan existed before Chen Wangting. Moreover, the Yang and Wu (Jianquan) lineages never gave up acknowledging Zhang Sanfeng as their founder. He adds that, in Chen Village, Zhaobao, and Wangbao, it is 'common knowledge' that the immortal Zhang is the founder. He also points to similar language and principles in *tongbeiquan* manuals and other manuals that predate Yang. Asking rhetorically why the Li family's 'Shisanshi lun' (Treatise on the Thirteen Postures) is not attributed to a specific author like the other pieces, his answer is that it was not written by a family member but borrowed from the Thousand Year Temple, again reinforcing the notion of a pre-Chen genesis of taijiquan.

The pro-Daoist view is that, if the genealogy is authentic, then we can conclude that shisanshiquan and taiji yangshenggong existed before Li Yan and Li Zhong, and certainly before Chen Wangting. The form described by Song Shuming and Xiao Tianshi corresponds to that in the 'Li Family Manual'. Du Yuanhua, who studied in Zhaobao, says in his 1935 *Taijiquan zhengzong* (Authentic taijiquan) that the art was created by Laozi and transmitted by his disciple Mi Xi, and after five generations reached Zhang Sanfeng. Attempting to have their myth and Marxism, too, some pro-Daoist scholars take a benign view of attributing the origins to legendary figures like Laozi, the Yellow Emperor, or Zhang Sanfeng, considering it a patriotic gesture of respect to the collective wisdom of the Chinese people. They remind us that all of the arts have legendary patron saints (Lu Ban for architectural

engineering, Tang Minghuan for opera, and so forth) and that this is a harmless custom. They are fond of citing left-wing icon Lu Xun's 1918 statement that 'Daoism is China's [cultural] foundation'.

Taken together, then, the Li family and Wang family documents reveal a complex web of relationships, both of kinship and martial arts study, much of which centers on the Thousand Year Temple. If the documents are authentic, and the facts therein are true, and we accept that 'taijiquan' by any other name would smell as sweet, then it poses a real challenge to the Chen Wangting creation thesis, as Chen Wangting becomes a student of a precursor of taijiquan, and the 'classics' predate the Wu family corpus by several centuries.

### 3 THE LIU FAMILY OF ZHAOBAO TOWN

The earliest publication representing the Zhaobao style was Du Yuanhua's 1935 *Taijiquan zhengzong*. Elements of Du's claim were supported by Wu Tunan and Song Shuming. In the 1990s, Wang Zhenchuan of Zhaobao Town discovered a manuscript in the medical documents of a certain Liu family. According to the 1917 preface by Liu Fengwu, Liu found a manuscript stuck in the pages of his father's copy of Ming dynasty physician Zhang Jingyue's *Complete Works of Zhang Jingyue* (Zhang Jingyue quanshu). The preface tells us that, in 1861, his father, a physician, encountered a nameless sick man from Zhaobao, who crossed the Yellow River to visit a friend in Sishui and suddenly fell ill. The man could not be saved and on his deathbed vouchsafed the physician a martial arts manual, entreating him to preserve it. The manual bears a preface dated 1728 by Wang Boqing. The preface states that Wang learned taijiquan in Wen County from Zhang Chuchen and that the art had 'Daoist origins'.

The twelve texts in the corpus, now called *Taiji mishu* (Secrets of taiji), include some that are essentially identical with the previously received 'classics' and some additional texts in the same vein. The works are variously attributed to Zhang Sanfeng, Wang Zongyue, Jiang Fa, Xing Xihuai, Zhang Chuchen, and Wang Boqing. The first eight, attributed to Zhang, Wang, and Jiang, share the same language as the received 'classics', and the last four, attributed to Xing, Zhang, and Wang, while not the same, share similar movement and self-cultivation principles. The 1728 date of the preface places them somewhere between the Tang Village Li family manuscripts and the Wu family 'salt shop' texts. Contemporary exponents of Zhaobao style have now appended the prefix 'Wudang' to the name of their style, signaling their identification with the Zhang Sanfeng Daoist lineage and distancing themselves from their neighbors in Chen Village. Not to be outdone by Chen Village's

heroic statue of lineage patriarch Chen Wangting, Zhaobao has now erected no fewer than ten sculptures of figures in its lineage, beginning with Jiang Fa.

Qi Jianhai sees these texts as 'definitive proof that Zhang Sanfeng created taijiquan' [Qi 2003]. In this, he agrees with Li Bin and Li Shirong, who also hail this as evidence against the official Chen Wangting creation thesis. By hitching their wagon to Zhang Sanfeng's transmission through Jiang Fa, the Zhaobao camp has been able to reverse the direction of transmission and reduce Chen Village to junior partners, a role they vehemently reject. It is not lost on villagers aspiring to the middle class that what once was 'feudal dregs' is now an industry, especially when role models are just up the road.

Reaction has been swift from Chen family stalwarts, and in what has now become an arch rivalry, the number of articles flying pro and con could easily overwhelm any bibliography. As usual, opposition begins with accusations of inauthenticity, and the 1728 preface's error of writing 'Wenzhou' for Wenxian is seen as proof of an amateurish forgery. The stakeholders in denying the Zhaobao claims are both Chen family members and scholars who uphold the official view. A *Tianya shequ* poster who uses the handle 'chlsj' argues that 'Zhaobao' is not a legitimate, distinctive style because it designates a geographic region and not a family lineage, like all other recognized taijiquan styles. Skeptics also insist that Zhaobao has received no official recognition, precisely because it lacks a traceable lineage of innovators, and, in fact, the county registration of the Zhaobao Taijiquan Association has been revoked, and the Association has been labeled 'an illegal organization'. Moreover, in 2005, on account of its denial of the Chen Wangting creation thesis and claim to be the heirs to Zhang Sanfeng, Zhaobao was forbidden to send a delegation to participate in a competition in the Wudang Mountains.

## 4 THE WANG FAMILY OF XINJIANG COUNTY

In 2010, *Taiji* magazine published Li Wanbin's 'Taijiquan shi yanjiu de zuixin tupo' (The latest breakthrough in research on taijiquan history) heralding the discovery of Wang Zongyue's family genealogy in Xinjiang County, Shanxi Province. Wang Zongyue is a very contested figure in taijiquan historiography. It is critical to the Daoist case that he be considered a Ming figure and equally critical to the Chen Village and Tangcun cases that he is dated Qing. On August 18, 2016, a conference of local elders was held in Xinjiang County to discuss the implications of this discovery, and they decided that Wang was a native of Wangzhuang Village in Jiang Prefecture and that his dates were 1525-1606.

Li Wanbin uses the genealogy to flesh out the details of Wang Zhongyue's life and draw direct connections to Zhaobao. According to Li's reconstruction of events, Wang learned the art from Yunyou Daoren, a peripatetic disciple of Zhang Sanfeng, who passed through Xinjiang and was impressed by Wang. Li calculates that Jiang Fa studied with Wang in 1596 and returned to Zhaobao in 1603. At the age of 72, Jiang taught taijiquan to Chen Wangting. He says that this explains why Chen style First Route (small frame) is the same as Zhaobao style, but over the years it was influenced by Chen family paochui and gradually got harder. He says that Chen Changxing was the only Chen master who taught pure taijiquan, and that is what he taught Yang Luchan. Li elaborates a long list of descendents and disciples, ending with Wang Wuchen (b. 1939), who claims to be a direct descendant of Wang Zongyue [Li 2010]. Quan Jiamei posits a virtually identical account [Quan 2016] and Zhang Sengsheng stresses that this drops the taijiquan transmission directly on the doorstep of Zhaobao Town [Zhang 2011]. Yan Ziyuan is especially impressed with correspondences between the genealogy and Chen Xin's 'Examining the Martial Arts' (Bianquanlun).

According to Yan's reconstruction, in contrast to Li Wanbin's, during the Ming dynasty, an unnamed father and daughter moved from Yunnan to Shanxi and settled in Little Wang Farm along the Fen River in Fuzhou Prefecture, where the father taught hand and staff forms to the Wang family. Thus, Yan asserts that Little Wang Farm must be the native place of Wang Zongyue, and in moving about the county, Wang would naturally have passed by the Thousand Year Temple, where he transmitted Thirteen Postures Soft Hand to Bogong Wudao and Dong Bingqian. Later, Wang discovered Jiang Fa in Zhaobao and brought him back to Little Wang Farm, where he taught him for seven years. Yan further concludes that Jiang Fa is from Liu village in eastern Wen County, and Chen style could not have derived from Jiang because it already existed in the Chen family when they moved to Wen County. In the local Shanxi dialect, seventh generation Wang Gongyue sounds

exactly like Wang Zongyue, and Jiang Fa made a mistake in transcribing the name. Returning to Zhaobao, Jiang Fa taught Xing Xihuai. Meanwhile, ninth generation Chen Wangting brought the Thirteen Postures to Chen Village from the Thousand Year Temple, where, by the fourteenth generation, Chen Changxing preserved the Soft Hands style and taught it to Yang Luchan. Chen Youben taught a mixture of the Thirteen Postures with tongbeiquan that became the signature Chen family paochui, which belongs to the taijiquan family but is not the Daoist Soft Hands style. According to Yan, Tang Village people today confuse Wang Anmin with Wang Zongyue and misplace him in the Qianlong period [Yan 2016].

Wang Zongyue has been a shadowy but pivotal figure in the taijiquan creation story ever since Huang Zongxi's Internal Boxing lineage mentions 'Wang Zong' as a disciple of Zhang Sanfeng. If the genealogy is genuine, and the entry on 'Wang Zongyue' is believable, this is indeed a sensation and makes the official version untenable. Needless to say, reaction has been swift and dismissive. Among the many skeptics is Yan Ziyuan, who questions the paper and calligraphy as looking too contemporary and the writing style as violating the conventions of the Ming period. Traditional genealogies were padded front and back with hundreds of blank pages to accommodate future supplements and for protection, so even if the paper is authentically pre-modern, it is no guarantee against forgery. Moreover, the character used for 'yue' in 'Wang Zongyue' is a homophone but not the correct character: it is a place name rather than a tribute to Song dynasty hero Yue Fei. It should be remembered that Yan is a committed traditionalist and does not want the case for Zhang Sanfeng embarrassed by a crude forgery [Yan 2012].

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The small amount of primary source material available to historians before these recent discoveries was sufficient to fuel debates for nearly a century. The work of authentication and interpretation, reconciliation and integration, of the new documents promises to be a cause célèbre for at least another century.

It is in this context that new works in English such as Lars Bo Christensen's recent book *Tai Chi: The True History and Principles* [2016] should be read. Christensen has done us a great service by bringing the Tang Village Li family documents to the attention of practitioners and martial arts scholars in the English-speaking world [Christensen 2016]. The book provides original Chinese texts together with the author's translations and his conclusions regarding their impact on our understanding of taijiquan's origins. First impressions (of unidiomatic English, non-standard orthography, and an apparent lack of either peer review process or competent editing together with

a large number of factual and translation errors) should not deter the reader from recognizing the importance of the subject. Yes, it deserved a more serious scholarly treatment, especially in regard to the utter lack of historical and cultural context and the absence of a survey of the voluminous secondary literature in Chinese. An easily avoidable sin of omission at the very outset is that the author neglects to inform his readers that the 'Li family' of Tangcun is not the same as the Li family of Yongnian. Students of taijiquan history will immediately assume that 'Li family' refers to Wu Yuxiang's nephew Li Yiyu, preserver of the 'salt shop' classics and teacher of Hao Weizhen, whose son Yueru went on to popularize the Wu family style in the 1920s. Moreover, the odor of orientalism hangs over every page and will be particularly offensive to scholars in the humanities and social sciences who have striven to elevate martial arts studies to a respectable place in the contemporary academic landscape.

Rather than an exhaustive catalogue of the factual and translation errors, a few examples might serve as a heuristic. Christensen states that 'Gu Liuxin ... was a student of Yang Chengfu', contrary to all biographies of Gu, and that 'the texts are dated between 1590 and 1787 in the Ming dynasty' when the Ming dynasty ended in 1644 [Christensen 2016: 5]. His rendering of the Li Daozi stele is an example of translation error: 'He became a disciple in Three Teachings Gate of the Henan Wuji Temple, in the era of Shen Long, Xiang Fan, Ma Lan Cao, and Mother Dan' [Christensen 2016: 17]. The correct translation reads: 'He was born of the union of a divine dragon who came to earth and a wedelia herb'. This is corroborated by the many Chinese commentators, who interpret this supernatural birth as an allegory for an illegitimate child abandoned in the wilds. Another example is Christensen's rendering of the 'Wuji yangshen quanlun', where he translates:

**Before people start practicing the wuji yangshen gong they have no thought and no intention, no form or shape, no sense of self or other. The mind is utter confusion, all is but muddled ideas and the mind has no direction.**  
[Christensen 2016: 27]

The fatal error here is literalness and failure to recognize a standard rhetorical formula used in countless inner alchemy texts to describe the proper attitude to begin a meditation session. It is not a condition of ignorance that precedes enlightenment, and should be interpreted: 'Before beginning the infinity health-cultivating practice, one should enter a mental state free of thoughts or intentions, without awareness of form or shape, without distraction of self and other, and with an attitude of innocence and undifferentiated unity'.

Methodologically, Christensen is unaware of, or feels no obligation to share with his readers, any sense of the voluminous secondary literature on the Li family manuscripts that has exploded over the past decade and a half. This in turn has led to two gross distortions: First, he fails to encompass the wide spectrum of opinion on the authenticity and significance of the texts; second, he misses the other three recent primary document finds that have received equal attention by Chinese martial arts scholars. The result of this tunnel vision has been the uncritical acceptance of the views of one camp and representing this to the reader as settled truth. If authentic, the four documents will, indeed, require revision of our writing of taijiquan's history, but the bigger story may be the reigniting of the century-old culture war between traditionalists and modernizers, the commercial competition between villages claiming to be the birthplace of taijiquan, and the political struggle between official and dissident scholars, all of which go completely ignored.

Happily, the author betrays a number of underlying philosophical fallacies early on, so there is no delayed disappointment for the reader. In the preface, he declares:

**We have to acknowledge, though, that what made Tai Chi famous was the old masters all of whom had wonderful skills based on philosophical principles. There are still masters who possess genuine knowledge but they are, unfortunately, far outnumbered by the sport-like approach that Tai Chi has turned into in many places around the world. This is why the discovery of the Li Family Manual is so very important because the written material from the old masters is really the only source that can truly define the nature of Tai Chi**  
[Christensen 2016: 3].

Elsewhere, Christensen says that 'Tai Chi has been taught publicly for about 100 years' [Christensen 2016: 3], a statement difficult to reconcile with the assertion that it was 'old masters' who made Tai Chi 'famous'. Moreover, the tautological notion that 'old masters' possessed 'wonderful skills' is unverifiable, untestable, and instantiates the nostalgia that Rey Chow refers to as 'Orientalist melancholia', a condition characterized by mourning the loss of an idealized, ancient China [Chow 1993]. Underlying this attitude are three foundational assumptions: that there was a golden age in the past, that taijiquan is a stable entity, and that deduction precedes induction. Furthermore, Christensen's golden age thinking confounds the very notion of progress. Is the Ptolemaic system superior to the Copernican, is monarchy superior to democracy, feudalism to capitalism, candles to electric lights, smoke signals to cell phones, the naked eye to electron microscopes, the humoral theory to the germ theory? Are monarchy,



patriarchy, slavery, and polygamy superior because they were practiced in the Bible? Would you rather have your appendicitis treated by Hippocrates or your local general surgeon?

In the realm of human kinetics, today's women sprinters would have been in a photo finish with Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics, and today's women marathoners would crush the men's winner by a full quarter of an hour. Radical changes in body mechanics have revolutionized the high jump, broad jump, and shot put. The movement principles expounded in the classics may be philosophically and aesthetically pleasing, and may even, in fact, correspond to today's most advanced kinesiology, but they are not superior simply because they are old. Martial arts styles are inherently unstable and subject to a sort of Heisenberg 'uncertainly principle': if we focus on the name, the principles can blur, and if we focus on the principles, the names can shift. The basic fallacy is that antiquity equals authenticity. To use the language of Catholic theologians, Christensen is guilty of 'archeologism and antiquarianism', the assumption that the practices of the Apostolic and Early Church were intrinsically superior to present practices simply because they were chronologically earlier.

The question of whether taijiquan is the product of Daoism creating a martial art or a martial art absorbing Daoism is a critical issue in Chinese martial arts historiography. If anything, Daoism is an even more slippery term than taijiquan itself, but the issue has become highly politicized, which is understandable in the context of Chinese history and culture. However, for a Western scholar to stumble into this minefield bespeaks a certain naiveté. The assertion of Daoist origins has become associated with cultural nationalism and the search for Chinese identity, often called 'Chineseness'. Chinese scholars have built entire careers out of championing either Zhang Sanfeng or Chen Wangting, but it is very unseemly for Western scholars to insert themselves in this politicized process of roots-seeking and competing attempts to identify origin, creator, or birthplace as 'transient points of stabilization' [Laclau 2000: 53]. These debates exist because, as Derrida says, 'there is *polemos* when a field is determined as a field of battle because there is no metalanguage, no locus of truth outside the field, no absolute and ahistorical overhang' [Derrida and Ferraris 2001: 13]. In the case of taijiquan's origins, the state chose one side in the 'field of battle', wielding Marxism/Maoism as its metalanguage, but is it appropriate for Western scholars to take sides in this battle, and while shielding readers from the reality of the ongoing war? Is this a case of Western orientalizing and Chinese self-orientalizing? Finally, the author not only ignores the reams of secondary and even primary literature on the subject, but seems completely innocent of the wealth of theory that has flowed into the humanities and social sciences from such movements as postmodernism, post-colonialism, critical theory, and feminism, and that has nurtured the burgeoning new field of martial arts studies.

## CONCLUSION

No, the dust has not yet settled on the taijiquan origins debate, and the new documents may have raised the particulate level to new highs. It is perhaps premature to say for sure whether there are grains of truth among that dust, much less to expect consensus around a new paradigm. Two things are certain at this stage, however: That no history of taijiquan can be written today without taking the new documents into account and that the debate itself has thrown fault lines in China's intellectual landscape into sharp focus.

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